

Nimuendajá: The Eastern Timbira

73

Juçara (<i>Euterpe</i> sp.)	Piquy (<i>Caryocar</i> sp.)
Bacaba (<i>Ocotea</i> sp.)	Mocajuba (<i>Acrocomia</i> sp.)
Bapucala (<i>Leccythis</i> sp.)	Mangaba (<i>Hancornia</i> sp.)
Cariti (?)	Cajá (<i>Anacardium</i> sp.)
Guaibroba	Aracá (<i>Peidium</i> sp.)
Baurity (<i>Pisonia</i> sp.)	Óleo = babassu (<i>Orbignia</i> sp.)
Papá	

Strangely enough, he omits the palm that is one of the most, if not the most, important of species for the Timbira, namely, the burity (*Mauritia flexuosa*).

Snethlage thus supplements the list:²²²

Piamava (<i>Attalea</i> sp.)	Paty (<i>Astrocaryum</i> sp.)
Catalé (<i>Coccoloba</i> sp.)	Murley (<i>Brytonima</i> sp.)
	(Various <i>Astrocaryos</i>)

Of all the species named only four are really important in supplying a sufficiency of food during part of the year, viz., the four palms of the *galeria* woods—juçara, bacaba, babassu, and burity.

From the fleshy layer of the seeds of the juçara, bacaba, and burity fruits the Indians prepare more or less viscid beverages, which are very nutritious by reason of their fatty content. They are strained through little round strainers, plaited from *uarumã* strips, whose ends are twisted together into a peripheral pad (pl. 20, c). The babassu yields for food not only its strongly oleaginous seeds, but also the indwelling larvae of *Bruchus nucleorum*,²²³ which we have noted as used for hair pomade. The seeds are pounded in a mortar, and the pulp is rinsed with water, whence there evolves a fatty, white juice, which is poured through the above-mentioned strainer.

Anciently tribes waged war over stands of babassu, as in the fighting between the Krahô' and the Pôrekamekra noted by Pohl.²²⁴ It was obviously this palm whose ownership was at stake; for it is especially common on the left bank of the Tocantina.

Ribeiro mentions the mocajuba trunk as a source of food and drink, a use I have never myself noted. On the other hand, the palmitos, leaf shoots, of the juçara and especially of the anajá (*Maximiliana regia*) are occasionally consumed even today.

In times of dearth the Ramkô'kamekra prepare a kind of flour from the root of the patioba (*Caladium* sp.; Timbira: mriti), which grows in the water of creeks and swamps.

As an article of diet, wild honey is equally insignificant. Snethlage describes the procedure of hacking it out of the trees and pouring it into gourd bottles. I have never seen beehives in Timbira villages.

Except for honey, the gathering of wild food is principally a feminine task; even nowadays women and girls are rather addicted to it. Marching through the steppe, they glance all around, almost instinctively scouring the country, and collect whatever comes near them into a gourd bowl, which they generally take along on such trips. Sometimes a large bevy of girls, especially young ones, jointly roam over the steppe for days in quest of fruits. In order not to miss their customary dances every night, they take a precentor with them, but otherwise decline a male escort and would manhandle any lad who should thrust his company upon them. During one of these marches, in 1933, I observed the following remarkable terminal performance.

During the last period of seclusion of the initiation festival held at the time a dozen girls with the precentor Kaukré and his wife marched about forty kilometers

²²² Nordestbras. Ind., 160.

²²³ Cf. Frôes Abreu, Terra das Palmeiras, 54.

²²⁴ Pohl, 2:137.

114 University of California Publications in Am. Arch. and Ethn.

Accordingly rape was unknown, the only contrary instance being that of an Indian who had been intoxicated to senselessness in a Neobrazilian house; on the way home he ravished his twelve-year old daughter, but on coming to he had not the slightest recollection of his deed.

DAILY DANCES

The relations of the young people of opposite sex are best illustrated by their joint dances in the plaza, which normally take place three times every day during the ceremonial season. The party includes as participants:

1. The precentor, *ikrérekaté*. Of this category the Canella have two or three good representatives and a number of mediocre ones. The younger ones who show talent are instructed by the older precentors, at whose side they appear. A worthy precentor requires a good voice, a good memory for the innumerable dance songs, and bodily endurance. His instrument is the dance rattle, *ko'tói*, made of the rind, usually painted red, of a *Crescentia cujete*, mounted on a wooden handle that projects above as an elongated tip, by which the rattle can be planted in the ground (pl. 32, b, c). At the grip end a rectangular hole in the handle permits the insertion of a plaited wrist loop, which has a long tassel. The precentor is by no means a medicine-man nor has his rattle the slightest religious significance, as Abreu erroneously assumes.¹⁰⁰

A remarkable description of the rattle wielded by a *Pörekamekra* precentor is given by Pohl: "This [precentor] carried in his right hand a $\frac{3}{4}$ -yard-long staff along which a blackened coconut shell could be pushed up and down by the movement of the body. Within the shell were maize kernels, which produced a loud noise." I have never seen such an instrument, which recalls the "taran" observed by Sneathlage among the Moré of the upper Madeira region. But Pohl does not seem to have closely viewed the object he describes, for it could hardly have been a "coconut shell" and the "maize kernels" were presumably the black *pamti* seeds which both the Eastern and Western Timbira exclusively use and specially cultivate for this purpose.

The precentor generally wears a forehead band, a neck band with a tassel for the back of the neck, sashes across the chest, sometimes cotton bracelets—never a loincloth such as Jurandyr Paes Leme paints in representing a Ponto dance.¹⁰¹

2. The precentress, *mehökrepüi*, has already been referred to (p. 97).

3. The girls from about their seventh year until at least their first pregnancy. Many a woman eagerly participates even subsequently so far as the care of her infant permits. On the other hand, women of the critical age or grandmothers never take part.

4. The males comprise at least the older members of the unofficial boys' class and the two junior official classes, *mepantúa*.

If the youths are otherwise engaged, the girls will dance by themselves, but this is certainly not the normal thing, contrary to what might be inferred from Sneathlage's and Abreu's reports, both of which mention only the dancing girls and the precentor, saying nothing about the participation of young men. Indeed, Sneathlage goes so far as to speak of a "women's dance."¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Fröes Abreu, *Terra das Palmeiras*, 180, 182.

¹⁰¹ Fröes Abreu, op. cit., 182. Pohl, *Reise*, 2:201. "Dieser trug in der Rechten einen drey viertel Ellen langen Stab, an welchem eine schwarz gefärbte Kokoschale durch die Bewegung des Körpers auf und niedergeschoben werden konnte. In der Schale waren Maiskörner, welche ein lautes Geräusch verursachten."

¹⁰² Sneathlage, *Nordostbras. Ind.*, 180.

Nimuendajá: The Eastern Timbira

115

535 The signal for the commencement of the dance usually emanates from the precentor, who goes to the plaza with his rattle, which he begins to shake there while singing in an undertone. Upon this signal the girls take up their position in a row and join in the chant, at first likewise in a low tone. Not until the second or third song is intoned do the youths rise from the sites of their age classes and face the girls.

533 The singing is confined to the girls and the precentor. Except for their periodic shouting in chorus the boys and young men dance in silence. So far as I am able to interpret them, the brief texts of the songs, which are repeated four or more times, refer without exception to animals and their mode of life, especially their food. The melodies are simple, but because of the frequency of half tones and deviations from our rhythmic patterns I found it most difficult to grasp and retain them—to the Indians' great and constant regret, the girls often enough vainly laboring with me. Not only the precentor but the girls, too, chant in strangely deep, guttural tones in two or three voices, individuals varying from thirds to fourths according to preference. The effect is ample, serious, solemn, in fast time growing impressively passionate; Neobrazilians disparagingly compare the Timbira chanting to the roar of wild beasts.

535 Women and girls stand in a row without moving from position; there seems to be no fixed cardinal direction for them to face. During the song they merely bend the knee rhythmically (*ikontoitói*) while their arms, bent at right angles with the palms up, are moved back and forth so that the hands nearly touch (*ipatapé*). I have attended several hundred dances, but never observed the alternate stamping with their feet described by Abreu, nor the limb contortions and circular movements of the abdominal muscles reported by Snethlage.¹²⁰ Pohl also failed to note anything of the sort among the Põrekamekra:

Their movements consisted only in their more or less curving in of the feet according to the time of the howling: the knees were bent forward, then the right foot was advanced and retracted in unison without abandonment of the dancers' position. At the same time their hands were bent in uniform fashion and these, too, like the feet, were advanced and retracted by all girls at the same time and rhythmically.

(Ihre Bewegungen bestanden bloß darin, daß sie die Füße nach dem Takt des Geböhles mehr oder minder einkrümmten, so die Kniee vorwärts beugten und dann den rechten Fuß gleichmäßig vorsetzten und zurückzogen, alles ohne ihre Stelle zu verlassen. Zu gleicher Zeit beugten sie die Hände gleichförmig gebogen, und auch diese wurden, wie die Füße, im Einklang mit demselben vorgestreckt oder zurückgezogen, welches von allen Mädchen zugleich und taktmäßig geschah.)

The precentress has her position in the middle of the girls' row. Whenever, as now and then happens, the precentor pauses for a few seconds, it devolves on the precentress to keep up the chant, which must not be interrupted under any circumstances.

The precentor's behavior is not easily defined in words. Approximately it conforms to the following scheme. He dances, usually from left to right, directly in front of the women's line, then returns in a wide arc to the left. But especially when the dancers have attained the proper state of excitement, which among all the Timbira takes a rather long time, this simple scheme almost disappears amid a host of variants. Then the precentor will vigorously chant and rattle at each girl singly, stamp his feet, stoop down before her, leap up with outstretched legs without change of station. A spectator gets the impression that the performer is making superhuman efforts to impart his own enthusiasm to the girl. While thus engaged he holds his instrument very nearly at the level of his girdle and to one side of his

¹²⁰ Fröes Abreu, 180. Snethlage, *Meine Reise*, 466; *idem*, *Nordostbras. Ind.*, 180.

the catchers raise their right hands, the expectant ketúaye simultaneously sally forth from their houses of seclusion and march to the plaza in single file, each group headed by its leader and the respective commandants bringing up the rear. In the plaza they form a double line between the catchers, the easterners facing north, the westerners south at a distance of about two meters from each other. Now the precentors assume their respective positions, while from all sides the boys' male and female relatives, as well as other spectators, come out of their residences. The boys' matrilineal kinswomen bring gourd bottles filled with water and place them on the ground; each stands behind her son, nephew, grandson, brother or cousin, thus forming an additional line on each side behind the novices. Some short distance

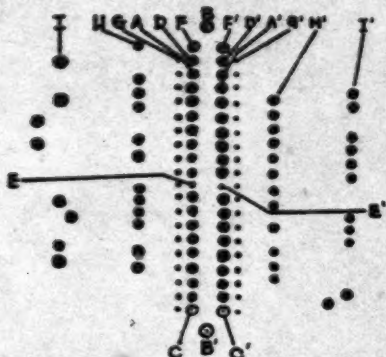


Fig. 12. Position of ketúaye for singing in plaza. A, A', ketúaye; B, B', catchers; C, C', commandants; D, D', class leaders; E, E', girl associates; F, F', precentors; G, G', kinswomen; H, H' male relatives; I, I', spectators.

behind these women stands a more or less complete row of kinmen, and still farther back are other spectators. (Fig. 12.)

Soon the precentors begin the songs and dance of the souls. There are always five songs, each being repeated several times. The boys take up the chant. The dancing, as always with this tribe, starts feebly, gradually growing more animated, and finally vehement. The boys' kinswomen step up to them, put their hands on the lads' hips, and in this posture join in the dance behind them. Only the two catchers at their outposts stand immobile, their right hands raised as though in benediction.

The souls are now supposed to be present, and the kinswomen profess to lend support to the boys by their participation.

As soon as the last chant is over, the precentors step aside, then the kinswomen take up their bottles and pour the contents over the boys. This coincides with the procedure for ridding oneself of the influence of the dead after a burial. In the meantime the catchers remain mute and motionless like two statues. Suddenly they drop their right hands, hitherto kept uninterruptedly raised, whereupon the two ketúaye groups, in the order of their arrival, depart for their places of internment.

So far as I am aware, the only instruction given to the ketúaye relates to the practices of the souls of the dead. The boys pass the time in their chambers as best they can, plaiting mats for their platform beds or manufacturing ornaments and the like. The commandant insists on quiet, staid demeanor, prohibiting noise and romping. The novices must not enter into relations with girls—a taboo sometimes felt as onerous by the bigger boys; every excess in this direction is strictly punished, the youngest member of the group lashing the transgressor's back with a rod at the commandant's request. Indecent behavior toward the girl associates does not occur.

The ketúaye are not at liberty to leave their chambers without the special permission of their mekapónkate. They are not supposed to appear singly in public. Accordingly, in the exceptional instances of absence by leave, they always dash to their destination and back again at a mad pace. Food is brought to the house of internment by a boy's mother or maternal aunt.